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U.S. Policy on Central America: The Need for Consensus

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The following is based on an address by James H. Michel, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Inter-American Affairs, for the "Great Decisions" series, Fayetteville, North Carolina, April 17, 1986.

Two propositions can help focus an analysis of the making of U.S. policy toward Central America.

First, that the Central American democracies are making impressive strides toward creating free and productive societies. They need and deserve our sustained support, and it is in our national interest to give it. A stable peace in Central America is important to political, social, and economic development of the region.

Second, that a peaceful settlement in Central America depends on internal reconciliation in Nicaragua. Unless the Sandinistas realize that they cannot crush their opposition through political repression and force of arms, internal reconciliation will be impossible. In these circumstances, U.S. support for the democratic resistance advances our interests in a manner consistent with our principles.

There is a broad consensus in support of the first of these two propositions. This second proposition is more controversial. Put differently, there is growing consensus on our objectives in Central America, but the means of achieving our aims remain the subject of debate in the Congress and within the public. Because of the inextricable links between the situation in Nicaragua and all other Central American issues, effective and coherent policy requires that this ongoing debate be brought to a conclusion.

The Progress of Democracy in Central America

First, let's look at democracy in Central America. On May 8, Costa Ricans will celebrate the inauguration of a newly elected president. This is not an exceptional event. Costa Ricans have gone to the polls and elected new presidents every 4 years for decades. Everyone expects that their elections will be conducted fairly and efficiently and that the results will be respected. These expectations have been regularly fulfilled.

More exceptional was the inauguration on January 27 of an elected president in Honduras to succeed a president who had himself been popularly elected. Consecutive transitions based on such explicitly democratic procedures had not occurred in Honduras for 60 years.

On January 14, another exceptional event occurred in Central America. A popularly elected civilian president was inaugurated in Guatemala for the first time in 20 years.

And in El Salvador a popularly elected president is completing his second year with growing confidence that he can implement his programs, complete his term, and see an elected successor take office. The success of democracy in El Salvador is by no means assured, but progress in the past 2 years has been impressive.

U.S. policy in Central America seeks to support and encourage just such progress: the consolidation of democratic governments, responsive to their people through regular, periodic elections—governments that are more capable of meeting demands for social justice, individual freedom, equitable economic development, and security. In the past this had not always been the principal focus of U.S. policy. That it is the foundation of our policy today is the product of a process involving many participants—in the executive and legislative branches and outside the government.

Perhaps most important, it is the basis for the growing consensus that undergirds our policy in the region.

Democracy and Consensus

We have learned some important lessons in our experience with Latin America. One of the most important is that democratic governments, because they must be responsive to their people, tend to be good neighbors, better able to achieve domestic stability, and more resistant to subversion. Democratic governments are more reliable as signatories to agreements because their actions are subject to public scrutiny.

We, as a people, are more comfortable dealing with democratic governments than with authoritarian regimes—our common interests are better understood. A foreign policy that supports democracy is consistent with our values and capable of garnering broad, enduring public and congressional support.

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Just a few years ago, many in this country would have thought a scenario of democracy sweeping Latin America with the full backing of the U.S. Government a pipedream. Even today, after all that has happened, skeptics remain. It has been difficult for us, as a nation, to discern what was taking place in the hemisphere. And the policy consensus lagged, first in recognizing what was happening and second in supporting initiatives aimed at reinforcing the democratic trend.

After years of controversy, the United States is establishing credibility on this issue—in the hemisphere and at home. The Carter Administration deserves credit for increased emphasis on individual human rights. Under President Reagan, the effort has evolved. Active support for democracy was the keynote of President Reagan's address to the British Parliament in June 1982. The record of our relations with Argentina, Bolivia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Peru, Uruguay, and most recently Haiti is clear. We seek democracy and not a return to dictatorship anywhere in Latin America. This policy applies with equal force to Nicaragua.

The trend toward democracy in Latin America gives hope for achieving a consensus on what to do about Nicaragua. I think no one would quarrel with the fact that a democratic Nicaragua would be in the best interests of the Nicaraguan people, Nicaragua's neighbors, and the United States. Only Cuba, the Soviet Union, and their Nicaraguan communist proteges would be disappointed.

Competing Perceptions of Reality

Despite increasing agreement on the importance of democracy to Nicaragua, we still are having trouble agreeing on how to get from here to there and whether it is even possible to do so. Why? I believe it has to do with perceptions.

Definition of the facts and of policy is important, because effective, consistent foreign policy requires a measure of consensus among the public and between the Congress and the Executive. The President is responsible for the conduct of foreign policy, but he needs resources. To get those resources and to know that they will be there over a period of years, he must have the approval of a majority of both Houses of Congress. And Members of Congress who must vote to grant or deny that approval are very interested in what their constituents think.

Perceptions of what is happening abroad, of U.S. interests, and of the nature of our policies affect the prospects for achieving the consensus needed to provide those resources. As you have read in the "Great Decisions" publication prepared for this meeting, a range of individuals and organizations become involved in building the consensus. Each, according to its own perspective, tends to assert a version of the facts and to interpret events in order to influence policy.

Decisionmakers, legislators, citizens, and kibitzers are inundated with information and analysis. The President receives reports from resident diplomatic missions, the intelligence community, key advisers, and foreign leaders. Members of Congress and their staffs travel frequently to the region and receive visitors from Central America with great frequency. The press and countless private organizations and individuals augment these official contacts.

And through the cacophony—of allegations, investigative journalism, academic research, State Department reports, fact-finding missions, Soviet-style disinformation campaigns, expert testimony, intelligence briefings, revelations by exiles and defectors, and views of foreign diplomats and international bodies—there emerges a picture of what is happening.

Because we have a free market of information and ideas, sometimes the picture challenges interpretation. Some sources of "information" wish to deceive. Some are misled. Many emphasize "facts" which support prior opinion. It is a fundamental tenet of our free society that no one has a monopoly on the truth and that allowing the free flow of ideas will improve the quality of decisionmaking. However, the wide range of interpretations given to events—and, indeed, the differences about what the facts are—places a real burden on the citizen and on those in government, elected and appointed, who have accepted the responsibility of trying to represent and carry out the public interest.

How well is the marketplace of ideas working in Central America? Does our policy protect our interests? Does it reflect our values? And can it be sustained? Let me review the facts that are discernible from my perspective.

Foundations for a New Consensus

The basic starting point for developing a new consensus is the reality of Central America's importance to the United States. As the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America succinctly concluded: "Central America engages our strategic and moral interests."

Central America engages our strategic interests because it is close and because it is the object of Soviet/Cuban strategic designs. If those designs were to become the reality of a Soviet base, the strategic interests of the United States would require us to redeploy our forces to protect our southern flank and vital Caribbean sealanes. In addition, the inability of the United States to help our Central American neighbors avoid the consolidation of a Soviet-aligned state in their midst, so close to our own borders, would demonstrate a national weakness and lack of resolve that would encourage our adversaries and undermine the confidence of more distant allies.

Central America engages our moral interests because its people are our neighbors. They have suffered a history of political instability, social and economic inequities, and poverty. That history includes episodes of intense U.S. involvement interspersed with periods of U.S. neglect. Yet, Central Americans identify overwhelmingly with Western values. They have demonstrated repeatedly in recent years with impressive turnouts at the polls that they want freedom and reject tyranny. It would be tragic to abandon them to totalitarians—of the right or of the left—who would impose their will upon them.

A second reality—less widely perceived but a reality, nonetheless—is that we finally have a broad strategy to advance our interests. The Bipartisan Commission made a significant contribution to it by articulating three major elements:

Support for democratic self-determination, so that governments will be responsive to the informed and freely expressed will of the people and will be concerned for the protection of their rights and for their welfare;

Support for equitable economic and social development, so that the human resources of the region can be developed to their full potential and opportunities for a brighter future can be sustained without permanent dependence on outside assistance; and

Cooperation in meeting threats to the region's security, so that reforms and development efforts will not be destroyed by extremist violence and so that nations threatened by externally supported subversion can negotiate from strength for a secure peace and internal reconciliation.

An important aspect of this strategy is the recognition that the political, economic, social, and security dimensions of the situation are dynamic and intertwined. We have discarded the notion that economic progress engenders social progress which, in turn, fosters political evolution. We have learned that if you focus on only one dimension of the problem at a time, the dynamics of the other dimensions will undo whatever gains you make.

It requires a sophisticated policy to address simultaneously the range of political, economic, social, and security concerns within each nation and within the region. It means we can't deal with diverse and complex situations with single-issue politics. We cannot have a policy that looks only at the military situation, or only human rights, or only economic development, or only the East-West dimension. But no effective policy can disregard any of these issues.

A consensus has begun to develop, I believe, around these facts and around the approach recommended by the Bipartisan Commission. It is found in the President's acceptance of the Commission's recommendations, in the substantially increased foreign assistance appropriations for Central America, and in the enactment into law by the U.S. Congress of all the new authorities needed to implement the Commission's proposals.

The activities energized by this consensus include greatly increased economic assistance, the trade incentives of the Caribbean Basin Initiative, security assistance within a framework of respect for human rights, and new initiatives in cooperating to strengthen the fundamental underpinnings of democracy, such as improved administration of justice.

This emerging consensus is also reflected indirectly in the diminished attention to Central America as a subject for front-page news coverage, except for the ongoing debate over how to respond to a hostile regime in Nicaragua that is aligned with Cuba and the Soviet Union. Progress in the consolidation of democracy, as exemplified by the elections and inaugurations mentioned above, is still newsworthy. The emergence of the new consensus means that most people now agree that this sort of democratic progress is good—which ironically also means that it now lacks the elements of controversy and novelty that would qualify it as headline news.

There are, of course, still some who deny that positive, worthwhile change is occurring in El Salvador, Honduras, or Guatemala or who assert that the United States is supporting repressive oligarchies in those countries and is so obsessed with anticommunism that it focuses only on military solutions.

It is more widely recognized, however, that democratic leaders in those countries are beginning to succeed in addressing political, social, and economic needs and that the support and assistance of the United States have been instrumental to their success. There is even tolerance within the American public and Congress for the notion that setbacks will occur, that progress will not always mean a straight line progression of successes, and that the Central Americans are engaged in a long-term process.

Recognition that democracy in Latin America is not impossible is contributing to a more balanced understanding of the nature and intentions of the communist government in Nicaragua. It is now widely recognized that the Government of Nicaragua has fundamentally different objectives than those we see being pursued in the rest of Central America. The Sandinistas have imposed a new dictatorship, forcing many democratic opponents of Somoza, who had joined in the 1979 revolution, first to leave the government, then to leave the country, and finally to go into open, armed opposition.

What We Ask of Nicaragua

Based upon the realities I have just described, U.S. policy seeks to change Nicaragua's policies and behavior in four basic areas of concern.

- The Sandinistas have aligned themselves to Cuba and its patron, the Soviet Union. The several thousand Cuban military advisers in Nicaragua are increasingly evident in combat roles. Daniel Ortega's ninth trip to Moscow last May was widely noticed in the United States, including by some who claimed to be surprised. His two trips to Havana this year attracted little notice. We expect Ortega to visit Havana and are no longer surprised when he does so.

Responding to these facts, we want Nicaragua to sever its unnecessary and dangerous military ties to Cuba and the Soviet Union.

- The Sandinistas support a network of subversion and terrorism operating against the Latin democracies. The guerrillas in El Salvador maintain command and control and communications operations near Managua and continue to rely on logistics support from Nicaragua. Communications with the kidnapers of President Duarte's daughter were channeled through Managua. Some of the weapons used by M-19 terrorists to murder members of the Colombian Supreme Court came from Nicaragua.

Responding to these facts, we want Nicaragua to desist from any further support for such subversion and terrorism.

- The Sandinistas have developed a large and heavily armed military force, wholly disproportionate to Central American dimensions, including the Cuban-piloted modern Soviet attack helicopters. Nicaragua's neighbors—especially Costa Rica, which has not had an army since 1949—understandably consider this threatening.

Responding to these facts, we want Nicaragua to return to a balanced, nonthreatening level of forces.

- And the Sandinistas have engaged in increasingly severe repression of the voices of dissent—in the church, the labor movement, political parties, the business community, and the press. They seek consolidation of a system of party control and are determined to crush their opposition.

Responding to these facts, we want Nicaragua to engage in a process of internal reconciliation and move to democracy.

This analysis of the problems caused by the communist Government of Nicaragua, for us and for Central Americans, is not controversial. Congress has enacted laws and issued reports containing findings of fact that track very closely with this description of Sandinista policies and practice and has voiced support for the changes we seek.

There is less agreement on how to achieve these goals in practice. The critical argument is over how the United States should go about changing Nicaraguan behavior. Some suggest that our policy should be defensive. That is, we should concentrate only on helping Nicaragua's neighbors defend themselves against Sandinista subversion and not be concerned with Nicaragua's military establishment, the Sandinistas' Soviet-bloc ties, or their internal practices. Others accept the legitimacy of these concerns but assert that they can be mitigated by a treaty in a form satisfactory to the Sandinistas, who would thereby be constrained in their behavior.

This argument overlooks the fact that the Sandinistas have shown that they do not want to be constrained. They have embraced the Contadora process when it served their tactical interests and have rebuffed it when it did not. As the negotiations have become more precise and have appeared to be moving toward assuring a comprehensive treaty that would place effective constraints on their behavior, the Sandinistas have consistently dragged their heels or attempted to introduce extraneous arguments. This leads some to argue that the departure of the Sandinistas is necessary.

Reconciliation Among Nicaraguans: The Key to Peace

Can we reach a consensus on remedies to match the consensus on the diagnosis? One place to begin might be to acknowledge the need for a vigorous

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diplomatic effort to bridge the differences between Nicaragua and its neighbors on the four issues that have become central to the debate: democratization and internal reconciliation, nonintervention, outside military presence, and arms limitations. The Contadora process covers all of these issues. The Contadora Document of Objectives addresses each of them explicitly.

National reconciliation based on democratic principles is one of the key points in the original 1983 Contadora Document of Objectives, and it was reemphasized in the Statement of Caraballeda issued in Venezuela by the Contadora and Contadora support group nations on January 12, 1986. Yet the Sandinistas have systematically rejected internal dialogue on this basis, whether in the form of competitive elections or even in the more face-saving forum offered them by the Roman Catholic bishops. Sandinista intransigence on this issue, evident most recently in a meeting of Contadora foreign ministers in early April, is a serious obstacle to diplomatic progress.

Without internal reconciliation in Nicaragua, Contadora cannot work. The victims of Sandinista oppression will continue their struggle, and their numbers will continue to grow. Nicaragua's neighbors will remain concerned that without a free press, fair elections, and an informed electorate in Nicaragua, the Sandinistas will remain free to resume external subversion whenever opportunities arise.

Within the executive branch we have concluded that if Nicaragua is to change the policies and behavior that threaten regional security, it will do so only because it feels it has no better alternative, that the pressure is just too great. The Sandinistas will realize that Nicaragua cannot become another Cuba only under the combined impact of diplomatic, economic, and political pressure from the international community, and the political demands of the Nicaraguan people given force by the military pressure of a united Nicaraguan opposition.

If this were to happen, diplomacy would have a chance. Without the pressure, the conflict will continue without much hope of a peaceful resolution. The Sandinistas may ultimately fail in extending the Cuban model to the mainland. But they have a lot of help from the Soviet bloc; and, for as long as they try, they will pose a constant threat to Central America and an impediment to the stability and economic recovery that are needed to help sustain these fragile democracies. If, on the other hand, the Sandinistas were to succeed, the Soviet Union would be in a position of major influence in the region between Mexico and the Panama Canal.

The U.S. Role

This challenge to the safety and prosperity of Central America and ultimately of the United States can be met without U.S. forces if we act in time to support those Latin Americans who support democracy.

The President has proposed further assistance to the Nicaraguan democratic resistance. The Senate has agreed, but the House remains engaged in procedural maneuvering. As the legislative process has intensified, the Sandinistas and their Soviet-bloc patrons, as should be expected, have mounted new efforts to refurbish their tarnished image and to vilify their opponents. Citizens, legislators, bureaucrats, and senior government officials are all challenged to know what is true and what is significant in all the noise.

As we carry out this debate, we must all be concerned with the notoriously short attention span of our own political system and our preoccupation with the need to reduce the budget deficit. Both pose a threat to continued progress in Central America. Our support—and I am talking about our moral and political support quite as much as economic and security assistance—cannot be allowed to diminish before the fragile new democratic institutions in the region have taken firm root.

Already, economic assistance levels to Central America, while substantially increased from previous years, are several hundreds of millions of dollars behind the levels recommended by the Bipartisan Commission. It remains to be seen whether the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings Deficit Reduction Act or the emergence of some new crisis elsewhere in the world will undermine the consensus and divert our attention prematurely.

We have been making progress toward a consensus on the importance of supporting democracy, growth, and justice in our immediate neighborhood, but we have not decided whether we will help those fighting for freedom in Nicaragua against communist forces who take a long view of history. I believe that a prompt and affirmative decision on this issue is necessary to the totality of our objectives in Central America.

We have forged the fundamental elements of a policy based on the realities and aspirations of the hemisphere. That policy is coherent and comprehensive and offers the genuine prospect of helping Central America to realize the promise of the New World. I hope that the domestic debate over specific issues and tactics will not cause us to lose sight of these objectives and that the result will be a stronger consensus that will sustain our efforts to protect important national interests and achieve goals of which Americans can be justly proud. ■

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